### Mini What you need to know about Miniature Horse and Donkey care NAGEMENT



Fence rails in Miniature Horse turnout areas should be closer to the ground and more narrowly spaced than what is required for larger breeds.

#### BY MARCIA KING

he small size of Miniature Horses and Donkeys belies their strength and hardiness. Explains Mikelle Roeder, PhD (animal physiology), professional animal scientist and equine nutritionist for Land O'Lakes Purina Feed. "The diminutive stature and extreme efficiency of Miniature Horses and Donkeys made them successful in harsh environments where nutrients were scarce and larger animals simply could not obtain adequate nutrition to survive. Their genetic heritage is one of great metabolic efficiency."

This combo of increased efficiency and smaller size means these undersized equids have slightly different issues and management needs than their larger cousins.

Whether due to breed tendency or incorrect care, Miniatures are more prone than larger equines to nutrition-related disorders, hoof and limb problems, dental abnormalities, and dystocias (difficult births). Here's what you should know about caring for your Mini.

### **Prevention and Routine Care**

Miniature Horses and Donkeys benefit from the same kind of routine care and prevention as larger equines.

Preventive measures Generally, protocols are the same for Minis, although dosage amounts are reduced. "Routine vaccines are given like that of a standard horse, while deworming is done per pound of body weight," says Daniel B. Slovis, DVM, co-owner and practitioner of Three Oaks Equine PLLC in Goochland, Va.

Contrary to rumors that have circulated on the Internet. West Nile virus vaccines are safe for Miniatures.

"I have encountered some Mini owners who refuse to give West Nile vaccine because some Web site said Minis can die from it," Slovis states. "No study has shown a complication with the vaccine and Minis."

Oral health Slovis also notes that some Miniature Horse and Donkey owners do not provide adequate dental care for their charges. But not only do Minis get the same oral problems as larger horses, they are more prone to have overcrowded teeth, retained caps, eruption cysts (soft tissue lesions overlying erupting teeth), delayed eruption, and wry mouth (cross bite). Monkey mouth (underbite) is also commonly seen in Minis.

"Minis have the same size and number of teeth as a standard size horse," he explains, "but all the teeth must fit into



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a smaller region. Due to all the possible complications, early and frequent evaluation of the Mini's oral cavity is necessary to address developing problems before they become significant."

Hoof care Unless they are undergoing treatment for a hoof or lameness problem, Miniature Horses and Donkeys usually go unshod, says Pat Burton, who is a Certified Journeyman Farrier and an American Farriers Association (AFA) examiner who works with Professional Farrier Services and Hoofpros.com in Burleson, Texas. Unshod Minis are usually maintained with regular trimming every five to eight weeks, depending on the amount of hoof growth, says Burton.

"Young animals might be trimmed as often as every 10-14 days if you're correcting a problem," he adds.

Because Miniature Horses' hoof walls are very thin, Burton prefers glue-on shoes for Minis that must wear shoes. If absolutely necessary, Miniatures can be shod with fine-punched, handmade shoes using very small nails (size 3 race or smaller).

It's important that farriers are trained individuals who can recognize problems early. "Improper trimming over a long period of time leads to problems," Burton warns. "Having the proper tools (smaller size nippers, rasps, etc.) is a must for trimming Miniature Horses and Donkeys. Additionally, technique and handling of Miniatures

requires specialized positioning in order to properly trim and balance the smaller hoof capsule."

Daily hoof picking is recommended not only to remove debris that can get packed into the bottom of the hoof, leading to disease or lameness, but also to check for and address early hoof abnormalities.

Grooming Likewise, regular grooming of Minis helps keep the coat and skin healthy, allows the handler to spot early signs of skin problems, and contributes to the horse/owner bond.

Clipping is a matter of personal prefer-

ence. Cazenovia College, in Cazenovia, N.Y., maintains a horse herd of 70, including six Miniature Horses. States Carol Buckhout, assistant professor of Equine Business Management, "We have a rather cold barn here, which probably attributes to the thick hair coat that our Minis grow. We body clip them, which then leads to the need for stable and turnout blankets. We also find they require body clipping in the summer to keep cool and for appearance purposes."

#### **Feet and Limbs**

Unfortunately, Miniature Horses and Donkeys have some acquired and genetic predispositions to limb and foot disorders. Slovis says Miniatures are more prone to upward fixation of the patella (stifle locking), and they are more likely to have limb deformities such as carpal valgus (knock knees) and varus (bowlegs).

Burton reports seeing limb deformities, weak tendons, contracted heels, and overly long heels in a lot of young Mini foals.

Laminitis and founder are also common problems for Minis. "These are often nutritionally related, but can also occur any time the animal is stressed," says Burton.

Treatment and prognosis for limb and foot disorders vary depending on the specific condition and severity, but generally,



Their small stature can be misleading-Miniature Horses and Donkeys are hardy and have exceptional strength in proportion to their body size.

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early attention improves the outcome, particularly in young horses.

"It's important to correct problems before the growth plates are fused," says Burton, "because once the cartilage has fused, it's much more difficult if not impossible to correct deviations."

#### Nutrition

The most common dietary problems seen in Minis are obesity and disorders related to being overweight. Contributing factors are twofold: overfeeding and incorrect feeding.

"Acute overfeeding can result in laminitis and colic, both extremely dangerous," Roeder says. "Chronic overfeeding results in obesity, which then contributes to metabolic issues such as high blood glucose and insulin due to insulin resistance or insensitivity. This further predisposes the horse to laminitis and colic. There are structural prices to pay, also: Horses carrying too much weight put additional stress on joints, tendons, ligaments, and hooves, thus contributing to or compounding painful ailments such as arthritis."

"Many owners try to feed Miniatures like large horses," says Sean Reichle, BS (animal science), product manager for Farnam Companies. "However, they evolved from hardy lines of horses and po-

nies that tend to be very easy keepers and thus can be very prone to obesity and related nutritional problems."

Overall, Minis need fewer calories per pound than standard-sized horses, but it's not simply a matter of feeding proportionately less.

"First, the relationship between size and nutrient requirements is not necessarily linear," Roeder points out. "Miniature Horses and Donkeys often need considerably less feed than one might expect simply by extrapolating downward from what a larger horse needs.

"Second, Miniature Horses are more

prone to hyperlipemia/hyperlipidemia (high serum triglycerides or fat) than large horses, especially when dieted severely," Roeder continues. "The insulin resistance that often accompanies obesity exacerbates this problem, which can result in pancreatitis and fatty liver. Dieting should optimally be a gradual process that involves moderate restriction of intake and regular exercise."

There are very few formulas with feeding rates and volumes specifically designed for the Mini's smaller digestive system.



Miniature Horses and Donkeys have some acquired predispositions to limb and feet disorders so it's important to monitor their development and catch any abnormalities early.

Says Reichle, "Most owners feed a largebreed fortified feed, trying to adjust the feeding rates down to a smaller horse rate. This doesn't always provide appropriate volume, so the horses still think they are hungry and will continue to eat. Hungry horses are more likely to have behaviorrelated conditions, including wood chewing."

To keep Minis svelte, owners need to modify portions and feed according to the Miniature's life stage (growing, lactating, etc.), activity level (working, breeding, or couch potato) and body condition. Also, they must provide adequate exercise.

"Those animals on a maintenance level have relatively simple needs and will survive very nicely on a surprisingly small amount of feed," notes Roeder. "Start with a well-balanced feed designed with Miniature Horses or Donkeys in mind, one that is relatively low in sugars and starches and calories, but higher in fibers from various sources (Farnam has a new feed designed specifically for Miniature Horses and pony breeds). Higher fiber diets are also better for Miniature Donkeys, as donkeys in general thrive on diets higher in fiber than

horses require and will have a tendency to become overweight and suffer metabolic issues if overfed traditional horse feeds."

Adjust intake to meet the caloric needs of the individual animal by weighing the feed, not by measuring its volume. If possible, feed smaller meals more frequently. (The Farnam Miniature Horse & Pony feed has a recommendation of 0.75 pounds per 150 pounds of body weight for adult maintenance, plus good-quality forage.)

As with any overweight horse, grazing should be restricted. "Unlimited turnout on a lush pasture is probably going to be dangerous for most horses of any size, as it constitutes an opportunity to constantly eat too many calories," Roeder says. "Conversely, a relatively active horse on a poor- to medium-quality pasture may be able to be out 24/7 and will probably need supplemental feed, especially in the winter."

Exercise is an important component for weight control, health, and fitness. Explains Roeder, "Exercise not only burns calories, it helps to maintain the metabolic rate, and it can decrease resistance to insulin at the cellular level, thus resulting in improvement in glucose/insulin status. Just about every system—digestive, lymphatic, circulatory, respiratory, skeletal, etc.—in the horse's body works better with activity."

Adequate exercise can often be achieved with turnout; if the animal is obese, turn him out in a dry paddock or very poor pasture where he can't consume many calories. Make sure he has the opportunity to

expend these calories by moving around and socializing, both of which are also important for physical and mental wellness. Longeing, driving, handwalking, or using a walker or treadmill also promotes weight loss and fitness.

#### Other Management Considerations

Some owners prefer to keep different-sized horses in separate turnout accommodations because of the increased risk to the

Mini, should he receive a bite or kick from a standard-sized horse. However, Minis and standard-sized horses generally get along okay, says Slovis. Incompatible individuals should be separated.

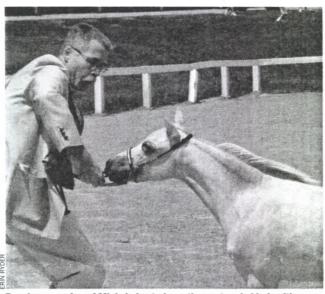
To safely contain Minis, rails, planks, or other fencing materials that create horizontal barriers need to be lower to the ground and closer together. Overall fence height can be reduced to Mini size if you're not enclosing mixed-sized herds. Reports Buckhout, "We have plank fencing at our facility, which works very well for our Minis since the rails are close enough to the ground to avoid Mini escapes."

Like their larger-sized cousins, Minis need shelter from rain, driving winds, and extreme cold—anything from a run-in shed to a cozy stall will suffice. These equids are not delicate, however.

For stabling, some owners simply make do with regular stalls. But make sure to hang doors low enough to the ground to prevent escape. Says Buckhout, "Since space is always an issue at our facility, we house our six Minis in two pens that are approximately 16 by 16 (feet) each. The pens have lower sides than a normal stall, and we put three Minis in each pen. We just have to be sure that we know which ones prefer to be together and which ones do not get along."

Others prefer Mini-sized stalls with lower doors that permit a view of neighboring horses as well as allow adequate airflow. Remember to place feed and water buckets within the Mini's reach.

Keep Minis' stall and turnout areas free of trash and debris to avoid cuts, injuries, and ingestion of foreign objects. Warns Slovis, "Minis are known to eat anything,



Regular grooming of Minis helps to keep the coat and skin healthy.

especially plastic bags. Since Minis have a smaller intestinal diameter, bags can get stuck, causing colic and requiring surgery to fix the problem. Usually the bag will develop deposits—minerals build up around the bag causing a rocklike structure to form (enterolith)-blocking the intestines. This is more common out West because of the high calcium in the water and soil, although this can happen anywhere."

#### Reproduction Issues

Of the Miniature-specific reproduction issues, dystocia and monitoring difficulties are of the most concern.

Christine Schweizer, DVM, Dipl. ACT, formerly of Cornell University, is now a field service veterinarian at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington, Ky. "We see more dystocias and Caesarean sections with Minis than with any other breed," she states, "not only because of problems with malpositions, malformations, overly large foals, but also because of the relatively smaller pelvic size of the Miniature mare in which to perform your corrections. In the larger mare these problems might be easier to correct, whereas with the Mini mare we might not be able to correct these without surgical intervention."

To reduce chances of dystocia, study the foaling history of the stallion (Does he throw bigger foals?) and, in general, breed larger mares to smaller stallions. Also, summon the veterinarian when foaling is imminent. "Any foaling that runs into trouble is easier dealt with sooner rather than later," Schweizer says. Early intervention can increase foal and dam survival rates.

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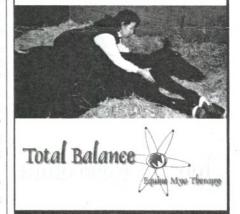
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Monitoring the Mini mare through her heat cycle and pregnancy is a little tricky. "Monitoring is done by teasing plus/minus rectal palpation and ultrasound," explains Schweizer. "Any rectal exam to any size horse carries the risk of causing a rectal tear, which is frequently fatal. That risk is heightened in Minis simply because of their small size."

To minimize that risk, the veterinarian can use proper restraint, sedation and/or a local anesthetic for comfort, drugs to help relax the rectum, good lubrication, and gentle, correct technique. Having small hands also helps.

"Still, the fact remains that if the mare jumps at the wrong time or chooses to strain at the wrong moment, she puts herself at risk," Schweizer warns.

Some Mini owners opt to forego rectal monitoring and choose other options. "In general, conception rates are good with pasture breeding or hand breeding, when teasing behavior is interpreted accurately," says Schweizer. "With a natural breeding. the stallion and mare are the best judges as to timing of ovulation. You can also identify behaviorally when ovulation had occurred: Mares stop being receptive to the stallion usually 24-48 hours after ovulation."

Specific hormones (such as equine chorionic gonadotropin, ECG) that circulate in the blood beginning about Day 40 post-

breeding can confirm pregnancy.

"The presence of ECG doesn't tell you if it's a viable pregnancy, just that there was a viable pregnancy at 40 days of gestation," Schweizer says. "But after 100 days of gestation, another hormone (estrone sulfate) is detectable, signaling a viable fetal placenta." Also, after 70-80 days of gestation, the veterinarian can do a transabdominal ultrasound to image the developing fetus.

Two other issues affect Mini broodmares:

Their breeding season often begins a



Obesity is a concern with Miniatures, but adequate exercise, such as driving, can often be achieved with turnout in a dry lot.

couple of weeks later in the year. Says Schweizer, "For instance, in New York I would expect an average-size mare to be having her first ovulation of the year around the end of April, but for Minis, it wouldn't be surprising if they didn't start cycling until they get into May."

■ Sometimes Minis hang on to a follicle in the ovary a lot longer than expected. "I have seen a small percentage of Mini mares who do this routinely," states Schweizer. "However, a retained follicle means she won't have a normal ovulation, and the breeding will fail to result in a conception."

As for Miniature stallions, the saying, "Bigger factories make more cars" is true. "Testicular spermatic output is directly correlated to the amount of testicular tissue present," Schweizer confirms. "So, in general, sperm numbers in Miniature stallions are less than in standard-sized stallions."

#### **Take-Home Message**

In many ways, Miniature Horses and Donkeys need the same kind of care and attention as larger breeds. They need training and handling so they'll learn to respect their owners and be safe around children.

They need preventive medical care, exercise, good nutrition, and proper veterinary care to remain fit and healthy. While their diminutive size could suggest a certain fragility, they are, in truth, anything but fragile.

"Miniatures are strong and hardy animals," Buckhout says. "They should not be treated as an inferior breed. My experience has shown me that they are pleasant animals that are relatively easy to care for and maintain."

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia King is a free-lance writer based in Ohio. She specializes in articles on equine and pet health, care, training, and behavior.



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